

MONKEYING AROUND

James Ford: Producing Arctic Monkeys



James Ford
Photo: Nigel Hillier

Arctic Monkeys' fourth album, *Suck It And See*, is a dazzling return to form — and to producer, long-time collaborator and 'fifth Monkey' James Ford.

TOM DOYLE

Although James Ford is known for his production on Klaxons' Mercury Prize-scooping 2007 album *Myths Of The Near Future*, as well as four tracks on Florence And The Machine's unit-hoovering *Lungs* in 2009, he is associated above all with Alex Turner and the Arctic Monkeys. Though he narrowly missed out — due, he reckons, to his being “young and inexperienced” — on being handed the production reins of the Sheffield quartet's landmark 2006 debut, *Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not*, Ford helmed its successor, *Favourite Worst Nightmare*, and then went on to oversee Turner's side project, the Last Shadow Puppets, for whom he also stepped in as drummer.

By 2009, Arctic Monkeys were clearly keen to remould their sound, and so travelled to California to record with Queens Of The Stone Age's Josh Homme, for the harder-rocking *Humbug*, which divided the band's audience. Tellingly, perhaps, Ford produced the three poppier stand-out tracks on the album, so it was no surprise when the news arrived that he had been reinstated as producer for the entirety of the band's remarkable fourth album, *Suck It And See*. Very much in the tradition of the great guitar groups, it has echoes of everyone from the Byrds, through Echo & the Bunnymen to the Smiths.

For his part, Ford claims not to have felt affronted in any way by the Monkeys' *Humbug* dalliance with Homme. “No, not really,” he laughs. “I talked to Alex about it early on and I thought it seemed to make sense. It all worked out fine. “I keep in contact with Alex a lot — we hang out and I consider him a friend. So we talk about what's going on quite a lot. I'd never sort of force myself on them, but if they ask me to work with them, I'm more than happy. They're such a talented bunch and such a nice band to record and to be

around, I'd be daft not to take up the opportunity."

Back To Basics

Never ones to indulge themselves in the endless editing possibilities of digital recording, the roots of Arctic Monkeys' live-sounding and unfussy *Suck It And See* lay in Alex Turner's stripped-down soundtrack for Richard Ayoade's Brit flick, *Submarine*. Recorded in whole, unedited takes by Ford at One Inch Studios in East London in 2010, its six tracks served to remind the pair of the joys of older recording techniques.

"It's a brilliant studio," Ford enthuses. "It's like how you'd imagine Joe Meek's studio to be. It's very 'audiophile', but there's not much there. There's basically a '60s one-inch eight-track tape machine and a mono half-inch from the '50s that looks like a huge oven, and then a two-track half-inch as well. It's just really short signal paths — literally, mic and Pultec preamp.

"Quite a lot of the tracks that we did were literally Alex playing guitar and singing and then me playing piano or Bill Ryder-Jones [ex-*the Coral*] playing guitar. But all around the one mic, a C12, straight into the Pultec and then straight onto the mono half-inch machine. Some of it was in mono and then on a few tracks, like 'Piledriver Waltz', we went onto the eight-track machine and had Alex playing guitar and singing. I did drums and piano and bass. But it was all one-mic drums and a really simple way of recording — we did a little bit of bouncing, and there was a really nice stereo plate, and we used one of the tape machines as a slap [delay].

"It sounded great and we really enjoyed that process of not having to look at a computer, not having the option to tweak and fiddle with things. And Alex is such a good singer and performer — if he's pushed to do it, he can do the whole take in one go. A lot of singers these days would be like, 'Oh you can fix that or tune that in Pro Tools?', and I think that's a really negative thing. I think he really enjoyed being pushed in that way. So it was with that idea that we went on to approach the Arctic's album."

Arctic Monkeys go America: from left, singer and guitarist Alex Turner, guitarist Jamie Cook, drummer Matt Helders and bassist Nick O'Malley.



The writing of *Suck It And See* began with Turner alone, penning songs in his Brooklyn apartment last Summer, where guitarist Jamie Cook then joined him to work on guitar parts. Subsequently, the foursome convened in an East London synagogue in autumn 2010 to begin rehearsing and fleshing out the arrangements. An intensive six-week period followed, with Ford joining the band in the later stages to add his thoughts on the song structures and arrangements and to record live demos on his Zoom H4N digital recorder.

"Some of the tracks were Alex's more introspective sort of songs, some of them were jammy rehearsal-room type things and stuff they'd been doing in soundchecks, like 'Brick By Brick'. I was very keen for everything to be sorted out before we even thought about going to the studio. That was one of my kind of specifications: that it had to be able to be played, all the lyrics written, all the structures done. We actually had a two-mics-in-the-room version of the whole album before Christmas."

Underlining his unofficial role as fifth member of Arctic Monkeys, Ford says the band are generally open to his arrangement ideas. "I'll happily get involved wherever they need me. Like, I remember in 'She's Thunderstorms', for instance, just trying to get it to flow and suggesting going to the middle eight early. Those sort of things probably happened on every song. But it's not me dictating that it has

to go like that, it's just lots of different suggestions. It's a collaborative process, I suppose. Having someone else around just gives them an extra kind of push in a different direction that they wouldn't have gone in on their own."

Ford says he intentionally resisted the temptation to demo the songs in a more elaborate fashion. "It's that 'demo-itis' thing," he reasons. "I didn't want the rehearsal room recordings to be too good in a way, 'cause you can kind of get attached to them. And obviously everyone had them and listened to them over Christmas, so it was more of a functional thing."

A Natural Sound

Having worked on previous albums with Arctic Monkeys at various studios, including Miloco, Eastcote and Konk in London, The Motor Museum in Liverpool and Mission Sound in New York, Ford has a clear idea of what the band look for in a recording facility. "They've never been fans of big, fancy, all-singing, all-dancing studios. So it's more about trying to find a place that's got a bit of a vibe that they can relax into. They don't really like the kind of studio where you press a button and the walls move. It has to be a bit more real. But it's a little bit slapdash sometimes about where we go. It Depends on the availabilities."

Early on in the planning stages of the recording of *Suck It And See*, the band decided that they were keen to

»

» return to California, scene of the *Humbug* sessions. Initially, the team had their eye on Shangri-La Studios in Malibu, originally built for Bob Dylan and the Band. Due to its unavailability, however, they were forced to look elsewhere, settling on Sound City Studios in Van Nuys in the San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles.

Renowned for its drum sound — as famously showcased on Nirvana's *Nevermind* — Sound City was formerly a warehouse-cum-small studio owned by Vox Amplification in the 1960s, before being refitted in the early '70s. Here, during that era, it bore classic recordings by the likes of Neil Young (*After The Goldrush*), Fleetwood Mac (*Rumours*) and Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers (*Damn The Torpedoes*). Part of the studio's appeal is that its décor has barely been updated since, and so it retains a certain shabby chic.

"There'd be a weird little cubby hole where Stevie Nicks had kept a bed," Ford says. "It had a nice sense of history. You could tell it had seen some dark days."

The fact that Sound City doesn't even offer an in-house Pro Tools rig further appealed to Ford and the band, who were keen to record to two-inch tape. And so the main attraction to the studio for the team was chiefly its custom-built Neve 8028 desk and Studer A800 Mark II 24-track. "Of the 24 tracks on the tape machine," the producer says, "we had to leave a track free for the code because we wanted automation on the mix. So it was 23 tracks, basically."

In discussing their ideas for the production of the album, Ford and the band decided that they wanted a Steve Albini-fashioned natural, roomy sound. "I wanted it to feel like you were standing in the room with them," Ford says, "and you could hear the space around the drums. I didn't want just a garagey sound.

"We actually stayed in Hollywood and then drove over Laurel Canyon every day out to the valley. They took all their own guitar amps and stuff that we've used quite a lot before — great old Selmer and Magnatone amps. We knew what we were doing, really. I've been in quite a few sessions where it's pretty up in the air and there's just too many things to think about, so it's harder to concentrate on the actual sonics and the performance. This time it



The basic tracks on *Suck It And See* were laid down live in Sound City.

was much easier in that respect."

Setting the band up in the live room at Sound City so that they were closely grouped and facing one other, Ford tried to recreate a rehearsal room-like atmosphere for the initial tracking. "We kept the drum miking pretty minimal again," he says. "We tried not to go for 40 mics on the kit, as some people do. We had a really good drum tech who came in — and I can drum tech a bit as well — so we basically ended up using this one old Ludwig kit throughout the whole thing. A really big, open kit sound was what we wanted."

Inspired by producer Glyn Johns' pared-down approach to drum miking, Ford and engineer James R Brown set up various configurations involving the Coles 4038 ribbon mic and the Josephson E22, alongside the trusty Neumann U47s and Shure SM57s. "I don't think we had a hat mic, or if we did, we didn't use it. We had Neumann U67s out in the room and we tried PZMs on the floor, but we didn't end using those either."

The plan from here on in was fairly simple: record a track a day. "They'd be all facing [drummer] Matt [Helders], playing live," Ford says. "Sometimes we had the amps in the room, sometimes the amps were in iso booths. We'd get them playing and track it all live, really. Drums, bass, two guitars and we had a [Shure] SM7 on the vocal so we could use it if needs be. We'd generally do three takes and come in and

listen through and pick the best one. But we didn't do any tape edits.

"Quite a lot of the time we ended up going over the vocal, but something like 'Library Pictures' is the vocal from the actual live take. Then we'd maybe double the guitar or do any drop-ins, but to be honest there weren't that many. We overdubbed guitar solos a few times and there was the odd bit of percussion here and there. But pretty much what we heard is what you get."

Precision Engineering

In terms of the musicians' individual setups, bassist Nick O'Malley generally used a Fender Precision through an Ampeg SVT rig, miked using variously the Blue Mouse, a Neumann U47 or an Electro-Voice RE20. "I'm a huge fan of the Fender Precision, especially a good old one," the producer says. "It's just solid and it plays well. We tried a distortion pedal now and again but I'm much more in favour of just cranking the amp up. You could hit the SVT pretty hard. We also took a DI, which we used now and again in the mix."

Alex Turner's rig typically featured him playing his faithful Fender Bronco — or occasionally a Gibson Les Paul — through his crocodile-skin Selmer Zodiac and '60s Magnatone amps. "Al does more rhythmy stuff, and for that it was just pretty straight, quite bright and punchy into the Selmer. We sometimes ran that and his old Magnatone

at the same time. It has a really nice vibrato on it and reverb. So sometimes we'd mix those two signals together, but just onto the one track."

A new sonic development for Arctic Monkeys on *Suck It And See* are the saturated Electro-Harmonix Big Muff-styled lead breaks that feature throughout — played mostly by Turner, but also by Jamie Cook. "It isn't a Big Muff actually," Ford points out. "But we were trying to get that Les Paul neck-pickup sound. They've got quite a few of those weird, boutiquey fuzz pedals that give you that warm, creamy fuzz, so we used that for the solos mainly. There was one called the [Coopersonic] Valve Slapper that we used quite a lot."

Cook's guitar setup revolves around a '60s Simms Watts rig and custom-built Rosewell Bluesman, though for the Sound City sessions, he also borrowed engineer James Brown's Audio Kitchen Big Chopper amp. For more ambient sounds, he'd plug into various toys, including a WEM Copicat or Roland Space Echo, Electro-Harmonix Holiest Grail reverb pedal and Fulltone Deja Vibe stereo phase/chorus.



Matt Helders' Ludwig kit, showing one of James Ford's miking setups.

"Cookie does either the spacey, watery, roomy sounds," says Ford, "which were vibrato and reverb and a bit of echo. Or he does the kind of heavy, single-note type of stuff. We used the Audio Kitchen for his heavier stuff — it had a Vox AC30 sort

of vibe, but with a bit more presence and clarity. His live take would be close-miked, and then we'd bring the amp into the room and maybe double it with a distant mic, Jimi Hendrix-style, from the other side of the room."

»



Alex Turner's guitar usually went through an old Selmer Zodiac (left) and Magnatone Custom 410 (right) amplifiers. Here, both are miked with Shure SM7s.

» Vocal-wise, Alex Turner would generally commit his parts to tape very quickly in the evening on the day of tracking. "We'd just do a few takes and choose the best one," Ford says. "Now and again we'd comp a better bridge in from another take, or whatever. But really the actual editing side of it was minimal. I've worked on things where people are comping between syllables, but it's pretty miserable. I actually think the sound of Pro Tools and that kind of editing is the sound that will date from this era. I think what people want to hear in a record is humanity and another soul there performing. And the more that you manipulate and fuck with that, the further away that thing gets. Obviously, there are some bits that are a little bit out of tune. But there is that unreasonable standard of perfection these days, where everything is so in-tune and in-time that you notice if anything strays slightly from that."

"Mic-wise, we had a shoot-out between the Neumann U67 and the Bock 251, which was another of James Brown's interventions. I'd normally use a 67 on AI, and there was the odd time we used an SM7 for a bit more of a crunchy sort of thing. But I'd say 90 percent of the vocals were through this green Bock."

Another new feature of the Arctic Monkeys' sound on this fourth album is their massed harmonies, mainly recorded by Matt Helders, Alex Turner and — down in the bass register — Nick O'Malley. "Matt does a lot of singing on this. He does most of the BVs live and he's a good singer in his own right, so we pushed him quite hard to do quite a lot of BVs. Alex did the odd one here and there and they did some together, Queen-style, round the same mic. Nick does a really low number on 'Brick By Brick'.

But most of the time it was Matt."

Proving there was no producer rivalry between Ford and Josh Homme, the Queens Of The Stone Age frontman popped by one evening to add his voice to 'All My Own Stunts'. "I suppose it's the most *Humbug-y* of the tracks on there," Ford says. "It was just this kind of snakey BV that AI did, and you could just tell it was made for Josh to sing. I remember being quite intimidated by him. I think I looked really stoned, and once he'd done a vocal, I found giving him my critique of it quite difficult [*laughs*]. He's quite a big man. But he was really sweet and he pretty much did it first time."

If the process of recording the album sounds entirely painless, Ford admits that there were, in fact, moments of stress.

"Just keeping the momentum going was the difficult thing," he says. "We literally did a track a day, and we didn't have that much time for things to go wrong, really. We wanted to stick to this self-imposed schedule. I remember pushing quite hard on the BVs and the vocals. There were some more stressful moments in that sort of way."

Apart from one nameless track that was abandoned, it was the sweetly poppy 'Piledriver Waltz' that proved the most difficult in Ford's mind, mainly because he'd already recorded it with Turner for the *Submarine* soundtrack. "Obviously, because me and Alex had lived with that song for quite a long time, it was almost 'demo-itis'. Doing a different version of a song is always a really hard thing to do, especially with the same people involved. Maybe it was just in my own head. At one point I think we were maybe gonna leave it off, but it's such a good song and the band playing it really does bring an extra element to it."

Something Extra

When it came to mix time, Ford and the band brought in Craig Silvey, whose recent work with Arcade Fire (see *SOS* November 2010: www.soundonsound.com/sos/nov10/articles/it-1110.htm) and the Horrors they had much admired. Silvey moved the sessions on to Studio 2 at Sunset Sound in LA, where he mixed *Suck It And See* on a Neve 8088 with Flying Faders. "Craig we've all met before," Ford points out. "We didn't want it to be just handed out to some random person. And obviously Craig's brilliant and he's just off the back



For the majority of the tracks on the album, Jamie Cook played through an Audio Kitchen Big Chopper (left, miked with a Josephson e22) and Rosewell Bluesman.



For more ambient guitar sounds, Jamie Cook used a WEM Copicat and Roland Space Echo.

of lots of stuff we really like, so he seemed like an obvious choice. And also he's from that area of the world and so he knows the studios.

"We wanted to keep it in the analogue domain and Craig is very used to that kind of work. To be honest, a lot of the stuff on tape came off sounding pretty good anyway. The monitor mixes sounded great and some of the final mixes weren't hugely different. Craig just added that little bit of detail and something extra."

Generally, Ford and the band would leave Silvey to set up each daily mix, turning up late afternoon to oversee any tweaks. "I don't think it's really healthy for the band to hear the ins and outs of the EQ of the kick drum [*laughs*]. I think for them to be able to walk in and be objective — and myself as well — it's better to leave the mix engineer to it. Then you can listen to the monitor mix and hear what's changed and what's better and what's worse. Then make a few changes — drive this up, wet that up. He had a nice little setup of laptop speakers in another room, so we had an extra reference. Then we'd take it out and we'd drive around and play it in the car.

"'She's Thunderstorms' was a tricky one. It's the cymbals thing — I always think loads and loads of kind of swoshy ride cymbals makes it harder to get that sense of space. With 'The Hellcat Spangled Shalalala', we added an extra guitar part actually at the mix, which was quite mad. A weird, descend-y guitar part. Most of the time, we didn't have to make loads of changes. We were all on the same page."

Ultimately, *Suck It And See* is a triumph, since it audibly bristles with the live energy that Ford and the group were trying to capture. Remarkably, tracking and mixing took only five weeks in total. "It was one of the quickest recording sessions I've ever been part of," Ford attests.

For the listener, it's clear that Arctic Monkeys are still developing at an impressively rapid rate. And for his part, James Ford, from his producer's chair, is thrilled to be able to witness the band's progress. "Obviously, because they started with such a big record and such a big statement," he says, "they can't just repeat and repeat that. That isn't gonna work. But of all the people I've worked with, they really are super, super talented. I think they'll just keep developing and keep moving forward. There's a quality to that that you can't argue with." ■■■

SOUND ON SOUND

The World's Best Recording Technology Magazine

This article was originally published in
Sound On Sound magazine, **July 2011 edition.**



Sound On Sound, Media House, Trafalgar Way, Bar Hill, Cambridge, CB23 8SQ, United Kingdom

Email: subscribe@soundonsound.com

Tel: +44 (0) 1954 789888 Fax: +44 (0) 1954 789895

Subscribe & Save Money!

Visit our subscriptions page at www.soundonsound.com

All contents copyright © SOS Publications Group and/or its licensors, 1985-2011. All rights reserved.

The contents of this article are subject to worldwide copyright protection and reproduction in whole or part, whether mechanical or electronic, is expressly forbidden without the prior written consent of the Publishers. Great care has been taken to ensure accuracy in the preparation of this article but neither Sound On Sound Limited nor the publishers can be held responsible for its contents. The views expressed are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the publishers.